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ABSTRACT

Students in eight urban and three suburban high schools were asked for their perceptions of social studies, mathematics, and English. Although most students thought that learning all three subjects was important, they believed that learning social studies was less important than learning mathematics and English. The majority thought that their grade in social studies was more important than learning the subject. The students felt that their parents, counselors, and friends supported these views. Fewer than one-third of the urban students were high on measures of articulation between social studies and future occupations. Social studies teachers were generally perceived as little different from other teachers on affective measures and only slightly higher as interested in students as people. Social studies was perceived as being easier than mathematics, a finding which tends to be reflected in students' grades. Problem areas for teachers of social studies are noted, and suggestions for dealing with them are offered. (Author/ND)

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Occasional Paper No. 6

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

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Introductory Statement

The Center's mission is to improve teaching in American schools. Its work is carried out through three research and development programs--Teaching Effectiveness, The Environment for Teaching, and Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism--and a technical assistance program, the Stanford Urban/Rural Leadership Training Institute. A program of Exploratory and Related Studies includes smaller studies not included in the major programs. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources is also a part of the Center.

The research reported here was conducted in association with the studies of evaluation and authority within the Environment for Teaching Program.

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Abstract

Students in eight urban and three suburban high schools were asked for their perceptions of Social Studies, Math, and English; 772 urban students and 664 suburban students were given questionnaires. Most students thought that learning all three subjects was important, but that learning Social Studies was less important than learning Math and English. More of them thought their grade in Social Studies was very important than thought learning the subject was very important. The students thought that their parents, counselors, and friends supported these views. Fewer than a third of the urban students were high on measures of articulation between Social Studies and future occupations. Social Studies teachers were perceived as little different from other teachers on affective measures; only slightly more students thought Social Studies teachers were very interested in them as people. Social Studies was perceived as being easier than Math, and the students' grades tended to reflect this finding. Problem areas for teachers of Social Studies are noted, and suggestions for dealing with them are offered.

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

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Introduction

Social Studies teachers are faced with a number of problems unique to their subject area. For example, students hold a number of beliefs about Social Studies that diminish the salience of the subject, the most common being that Social Studies is easier than Math or English courses. Some students go as far as to say that Social Studies are "push-over" or "easy-grade" courses. In an informal survey of one class of 20 students, 75 percent of the students ranked Social Studies as easier than Math and English.

Critics of Social Studies suggest that these types of courses should be eliminated from the high school curriculum because students do not learn any basic skills in them. They maintain that Social Studies courses waste time, energy, and finances, which could be used to help students with the basic English and Math skills needed for future performance in the larger society. Defenders argue that Social Studies courses are not supposed to be "hard" courses. Rather, they are seen as important for building character and developing interpersonal skills, and therefore very important for the student's future. One could say that Social Studies courses teach different kinds of basic skills from Math or English.

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These skills are often referred to as social skills. The Committee of the National Council for the Social Studies has described the purpose of those skills in this way:

> The ultimate goal of education in the Social Studies is the development of desirable sociocivic and personal behavior . . . The purpose of teaching skills in Social Studies is to enable the individual to gain knowledge concerning his society, to think reflectively about problems and issues, and to apply this thinking in constructive action. (Quoted in Gross et al., 1970, pp. 149-150.)

We examined various questions in order to better understand the differences that students perceive among three academic subjects--Social Studies, Math, and English--with a specific interest in and focus on Social Studies.

1. Do students perceive a link between Social Studies courses and their futures--specifically, their future occupations?
2. Is learning Social Studies considered important by students?
3. Do students perceive that their parents, counselors, and friends consider Social Studies important?
4. Is learning the material in each of these three fields more important than the grade, or is the grade more important?
5. How difficult do students think Social Studies is compared to Math and English?
6. Do students enjoy Social Studies more than Math or English?
7. Are Social Studies teachers warmer and friendlier to students than other teachers?
8. What can be done to alleviate problems specific to Social Studies?

In this paper we summarize the answers to these questions. Not all of our data are reported here.

Data Base

Our major source of data for this paper was questionnaires administered to a five percent random sample of students in eight comprehensive

and academic high schools in the San Francisco Unified School District in 1974. A five percent random sample was large enough to be representative of the great diversity of students and schools in this district. The total sample size for these eight schools was 772 students. The ethnic breakdown of students was Spanish-Surname (N=133), Other White (N=184), Black (N=209), Asian-American (N=183); 63 were not classified.

For purposes of comparison, we refer to a second sample, consisting of 664 students from three schools, one in each of three suburban middle-class school districts. There were very few students from ethnic minorities in these schools.

We paid $2.00 to each student who filled out our lengthy questionnaire in hopes of getting full participation and more reliable data. The payment of money did help us gain the cooperation of those students who were least satisfied with school and schooling. Some minority students were distrustful of the entire enterprise, although the questionnaire administrators, many of whom were themselves minority students, helped reduce that distrust. Since many students had severe reading problems, we helped them to read the questionnaire. We had to read the whole questionnaire to a few students. For the Spanish-Surname students it was sometimes necessary to translate parts of the questionnaire into Spanish.

The majority of questions were subject-specific. That is, we asked the students to answer each question for each of four subject areas: Mathematics, English, Social Studies, and Vocational/Business. Thus, we were able to compare student responses among subjects. In this paper we focus our comparisons on the academic subjects only: Math, English, and Social Studies.

Almost all students in our survey were currently enrolled in Social Studies and English courses. Slightly fewer were enrolled in Math classes. Thus, the experience base in Social Studies was equal to that in English and slightly greater than in Math.

Additional background data for each student were provided by the school. Some of the important background data were level of achievement on junior high and high school standardized tests, grades, unexcused absences, and ethnicity. These objective measures could be compared with the more subjective reports of students, and also provided important control variables.

Methodology

In this report we look mainly at patterns and consistency within the data. Comparisons are made by cross-tabulating key variables, with variables such as ethnicity and sex often used as controls. Two variables in this report are measured by scales. Diffuse responsiveness is measured by a Guttman scale. That is, a number of questions have been combined to form a single measure. If a set of questions forms a Guttman scale, we are assured that the variable is measuring a single dimension. The other combined measure is perceived articulation between each school subject and later occupations. This was not a Guttman scale but a combination of three separate questions. Our other variables are usually measured by a single question.

Articulation between School and Work

"Articulation" usually refers to the link between a given situation and other situations. We use the term to refer to the degree of linkage

which students perceive between schooling and their occupational goals. We obtained a measure of perceived articulation for Math, English, and Social Studies. We asked three questions, which we combined into a single scale. The questions were: "How important is learning (each subject) in helping you enter into the kind of work you expect to be doing for most of your life?," "How important is learning (each subject) in helping you be good at the kind of work you expect to be doing for most of your life?," and "How important are grades (in each subject) in helping you enter into the kind of work you expect to be doing for most of your life?"

Table 1 gives the proportion of students who perceived high articulation between each subject and their future jobs. Even though students in the suburbs were lower on our measures of perceived articulation than the urban students, all students perceived lower articulation for Social Studies than for Math and English.

TABLE 1

Proportion of Students Perceiving High Articulation between School Subjects and Future Jobs, by Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.60	(717)	.46	(618)
English	.60	(721)	.48	(625)
Social Studies	.31	(677)	.23	(605)

When we divided our samples into ethnic and sex groups we found that the same pattern persisted (data not shown). That is, for both males and females in every ethnic group, the proportion of students who perceived articulation was considerably lower in Social Studies than in Math and English.

We have singled out the components of articulation for further analysis: (1) the importance of learning a subject for entry into the occupation of their choice, (2) the importance of learning a subject for performance in that occupation, and (3) the importance of grades for entry into that occupation. Tables 2 and 3 show that learning Social Studies is perceived as less important than learning Math and English both for entry into an occupation and for performance in that occupation. These findings

TABLE 2

Proportion of Students Reporting Learning
Each Subject as Very or Extremely Important
for Entrance into their Chosen Occupation, by Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.64	(767)	.50	(650)
English	.65	(761)	.57	(657)
Social Studies	.33	(746)	.26	(653)

TABLE 3

Proportion of Students Reporting Learning
Each Subject as Very or Extremely Important
for Performance in Their Chosen Occupation, by Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.68	(743)	.53	(650)
English	.69	(751)	.56	(657)
Social Studies	.38	(719)	.30	(652)

are repeated for all ethnic groups and for both males and females. As can be seen in the tables, the data from the suburbs were just as orderly.

Few students perceived that learning Social Studies would be very important for getting into the occupation of their choice or for their performance in that occupation. On the other hand, most students reported that it was very or extremely important to learn Math and English for both entry and performance.

Table 4 shows that the same general pattern persists. All students see Social Studies and work as articulated less than Math and work or English and work. However, a larger proportion of students perceive that the grade in Social Studies is important for entry into an occupation.

TABLE 4

Proportion of Students Reporting Grades as Very or Extremely Important for Entrance into their Chosen Occupation, by Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.67	(730)	.55	(652)
English	.67	(732)	.60	(659)
Social Studies	.44	(704)	.43	(656)

Again, controlling for sex or ethnicity did not change this pattern. The Social Studies grade probably was viewed as affecting future educational opportunities that were necessary for entering an occupation.

In other papers we have shown that high articulation leads to regarding an activity as highly important, which in turn leads to high effort (Espinosa et al., 1975; Fernández et al., 1975). That is, if a student perceives a link between a subject in school and his or her future occupation, that student sees that subject as more important and will exert

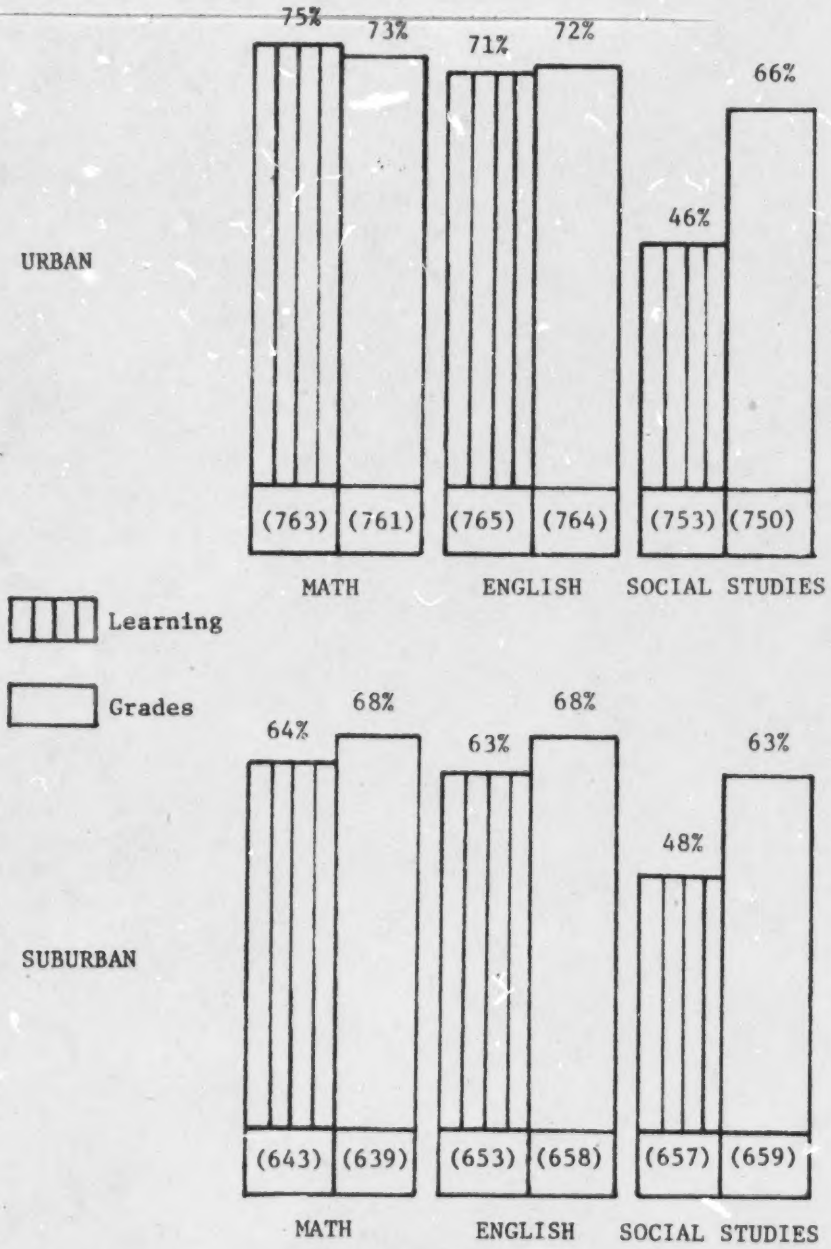
more effort in that subject. Thus, the findings presented above have special implications for Social Studies.

Perhaps the reason for low articulation between Social Studies and work is that Social Studies has never been directly oriented toward vocations or careers. The focus of Social Studies has been in the realm of "general education," whereas Math and English have been portrayed as providing skills needed for careers.

Relative Importance of Learning and Grades

Two items on our questionnaire measured the importance of each school subject to the student. They were: (1) How important to you is learning the subject in each of these classes? and (2) How important to you is your grade in each of these classes? Since students were lower in their perception of articulation for Social Studies than for the other two subjects, one would expect them to place lower importance on it. Indeed, that is what we found. For importance of both grades and learning, all students were generally high. Yet, a lower proportion of students considered Social Studies courses important, compared with Math and English. For the importance of learning, the proportions of students in the city who considered each subject very or extremely important were: .75 for Math, .71 for English, and .46 for Social Studies (see Figure 1). For the importance of grades, the differences were small. In general, most students considered grades important in all subjects. What is interesting to note is that more students saw the grade in Social Studies as important (66 percent in the city) than saw learning the material as important (46 percent in the city).

Fig. 1. Percentage of students who reported that grades or learning were very or extremely important in each subject, by location.



Controlling for ethnicity, sex, and location did not affect these patterns. That is, for all ethnic groups, for both sexes, and for the suburban and urban samples all courses were perceived as important, and Social Studies courses were perceived as less important than Math and English courses. More students thought grades in Social Studies were very important than thought learning the material was very important. For the other academic subjects, the differences in importance of learning and grade were not as great.

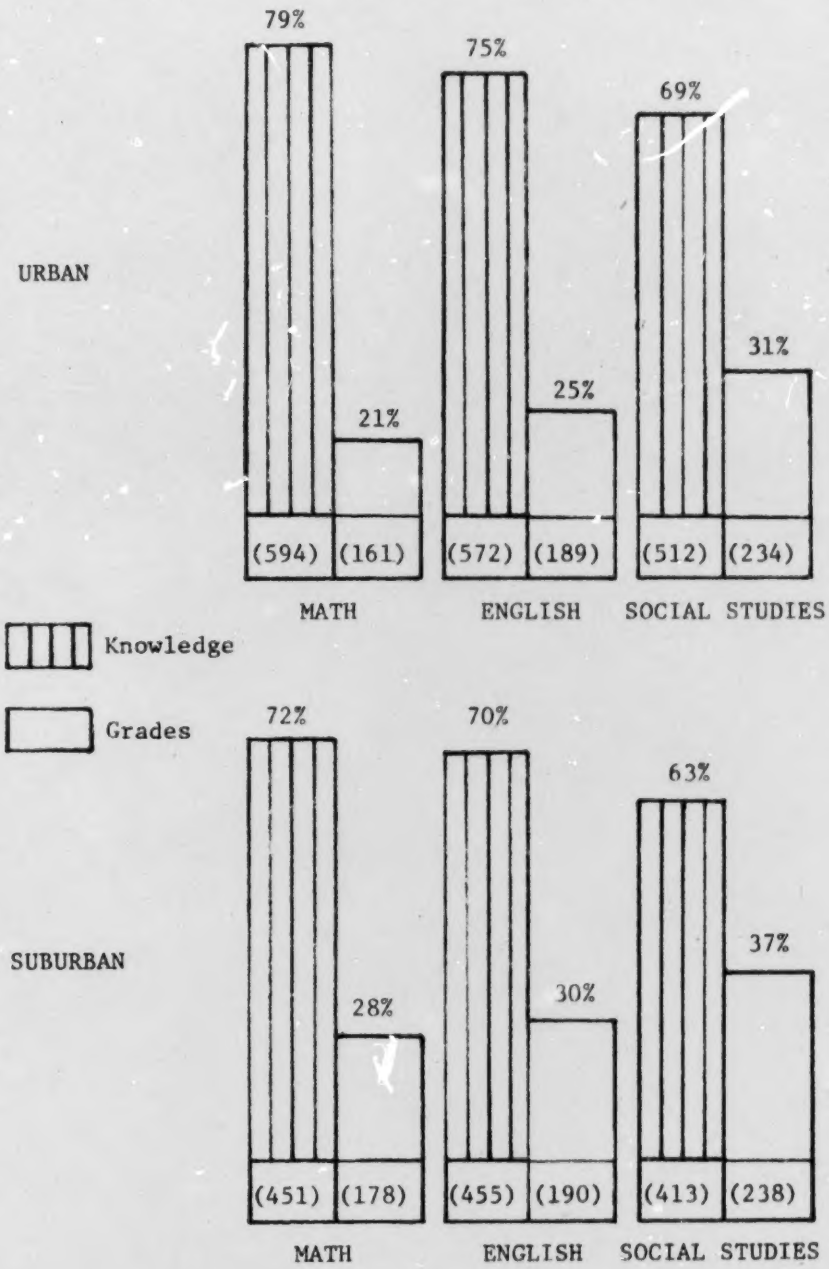
These findings were checked by another question we asked students: If you had to choose, would you rather have a high grade in a course or know the subject? For all courses, students said that knowing the subject was more important than the grade. Yet, as would be expected from the data presented above, students consistently reported that the grades were more important in Social Studies than in the other subjects (see Figure 2). Thus, the discrepancy between the proportions voting for knowledge or for grades is less for Social Studies than for Math and English.

In short, these findings indicate that fewer students consider Social Studies classes as important in reference to their occupational futures as Math or English. That is, fewer students wanted to learn the material in Social Studies and more students wanted the grade, since the perceived articulation of learning Social Studies and work was low.

Influence of Parents, Counselors, and Friends

Students were asked how others around them saw the three subjects. Potential significant others included parents, counselors, and friends. Since pretests that we administered had shown variation in student percep-

Fig. 2. Percentage of students who reported that grades or knowledge were more important in each subject, by location.



tions of the importance of classes to their teachers, we did not ask these students for their perception of the attitudes of their teachers toward the three academic subjects.

Table 5 presents the proportion of mothers who were perceived as considering learning Social Studies important compared with the the other two subjects. In general, students thought their mothers considered

TABLE 5

Proportion of Students Who Perceived That Their Mothers Considered Learning Very or Extremely Important, by Subject and Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.85	(747)	.75	(645)
English	.88	(754)	.82	(653)
Social Studies	.73	(725)	.69	(653)

learning Social Studies important. For example, the proportions for the suburban sample were: .75 for Math, .82 for English, and .69 for Social Studies. This same pattern was found in each of the sex and ethnic group subsamples. The data for fathers (not shown) were in the same direction and of the same order of magnitude.

For all groups combined, within each ethnic and sex group, and for both urban and suburban samples, most students reported that their parents considered learning all of the subjects important. However, Social Studies was perceived to be considered slightly less important by parents. Thus, students perceived their parents as supporting their beliefs.

We also checked for social influence from counselors. Like parents and students, counselors were perceived as regarding all subjects as important, and Social Studies as somewhat less important than Math or English. For example, in the urban sample, 68 percent of the students perceived that their counselors considered learning Social Studies important. The percentages for Math and English were 79 and 77, respectively.

A low proportion of students thought their friends considered learning any subject important. But even here, there was a clear difference between Social Studies and the other courses (see Table 6). It is interesting to note that in the suburbs the figures are lower for every subject

TABLE 6

Proportion of Students Who Perceived That Their Friends Considered Learning Very or Extremely Important, by Subject and Location

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.38	(655)	.24	(641)
English	.37	(651)	.25	(654)
Social Studies	.24	(620)	.18	(656)

than in the urban sample. In every table we have presented thus far, suburban students place lower importance on every subject than the urban students. Perhaps the middle-class students of the suburbs believe that even if they do not perform exceptionally well in school, they will still live successful lives. That is, since they have this society's advantages of being white and middle-class, they may place less importance on

schooling than the minority students of the city, who have to perform well in school in order to qualify for the better occupations.

Overall, our findings indicate that students' significant others support their view of school and schooling. Specifically, parents, counselors, and friends considered that learning Social Studies was slightly less important than learning Math or English. Thus, students were given social support that helped maintain their beliefs about Social Studies.

Difficulty of Classwork

We asked students how easy or difficult they believed their work was in each subject. Social Studies and English were comparable on level of difficulty. About one-fourth of the students in the city and the suburbs reported that the work in these courses was "somewhat" or "much too" easy. Math was perceived as more difficult. Again, these findings were true for each of our subsamples (sex and ethnicity).

A high proportion of students reported that if they did "poor work" in Social Studies they would not receive a "poor grade". Students believed that poor work would be slightly more likely to receive a poor grade in English and much more likely to receive a poor grade in Math. These data were consistent with the recorded grades obtained from school records. Table 7 shows that somewhat more students received A's or B's in Social Studies than in English, and many more than in Math. For example, 53 percent of Asian-American students received high grades in Math, 62 percent in English, and 74 percent in Social Studies. This pattern was found for every group except Blacks whose performance in Social Studies was lower than their performance in English. One possible explanation for this

TABLE 7

Proportion of Students Receiving High Grades (A's and B's), by Subject and Ethnicity

Subject	Chicano	Other White	Black	Asian
Math	.33	.38	.18	.53
English	.38	.57	.28	.62
Social Studies	.43	.58	.26	.74

phenomenon, for which we have no data, is that Black students have special problems in Social Studies courses because they are distrustful of socialization into the values of the dominant society.

Classroom Atmosphere

We were interested in comparing the subjects on the extent to which the students found each subject enjoyable, teacher warmth and friendliness, and academic praise from teachers. Since Social Studies is mainly "concerned with human relationships" (Committee of the National Council for the Social Studies, quoted in Gross et al., 1970), we hypothesized that it would rank higher on these affective measures than Math or English. The hypothesis was not always supported.

We found that there were no differences between English and Social Studies on enjoyableness. About one-third of the students reported that they enjoyed English and Social Studies. Math was generally considered less enjoyable (see Table 8). These results are consistent with earlier studies that used the Purdue Master Attitude Scale developed by H. H. Remmers (1934, 1936, 1938). These findings of rough equality of Social Studies and English were true for all ethnic and sex groups as well as for the urban and suburban samples. It should be noted that minority students

TABLE 8

Proportion of Students Reporting
Subjects as Very or Extremely Enjoyable

Subject	Urban	(N)	Suburban	(N)
Math	.28	(762)	.21	(636)
English	.36	(760)	.31	(657)
Social Studies	.34	(741)	.35	(658)

did not dislike Social Studies more than the white middle-class students did. In general, students enjoyed Social Studies and English courses more than courses in Math, but Social Studies was not considered more enjoyable than English.

We developed a scale of diffuse responsiveness to measure teacher warmth. The elements of that scale were the teacher's friendliness, the teacher's interest in the student, and the teacher's helping the student with a personal problem.

Our investigations of students' perceptions of teacher friendliness showed that English and Social Studies teachers were about equal. For example, in the city, 57 percent of the students reported that their English teachers were friendly, and 53 percent felt their Social Studies teachers were friendly. Fewer students (47 percent) reported this for their Math teachers. Controlling for ethnicity, sex, or location of sample did not alter these findings. Students did not perceive their Social Studies teachers as more friendly than their English teachers, but they did see Social Studies and English teachers as more friendly than Math teachers.

We used two other questions to measure diffuse responsiveness: (1) How interested in you as a person is the teacher? and (2) When you have a personal problem related to school, how often does each teacher help you?

Students in both the city and the suburbs reported that Social Studies teachers were somewhat more interested in them than Math or English teachers. For example, in the suburbs, 38 percent of the students reported that their Social Studies teachers were very or extremely interested in them. The figures for Math and English were 28 and 31 percent respectively. We did not find any major differences when we controlled for ethnicity. Even though the majority of teachers in the city were white, about an equal proportion of minority and white students reported that their teachers were personally interested in them.

Social Studies teachers were not more willing to help with the personal problems of their students. About one-fourth of the students reported that their teachers were usually or always willing to help with personal problems related to school. We did not find any perceived differences among teachers of the three subjects in this component of our diffuse responsiveness scale.

We found no differences among the subject areas on teacher praise. About 40 percent of the students in each subject reported that they usually or always received praise from their teachers for their schoolwork. There was no difference between the suburban and urban samples when all of the students in the city were lumped together. When we controlled for ethnicity, we found that in every subject, Chicano and Black students reported receiving more academic praise from their teachers than Other White

or Asian-American students. Low-achieving students tended to receive more praise from all teachers than high-achieving students (Espinosa et al., 1975; Fernández et al., 1975). Social Studies teachers did not differ from Math or English teachers in their use of praise.

In summary, Social Studies teachers did show more interest in their students as people than did teachers of English and Math, but they were not appreciably higher in friendliness, helpfulness, or praise. The interpersonal atmosphere of the Social Studies classroom was not distinctive.

Summary and Implications

Our findings indicate that Social Studies is regarded differently from the other academic subjects students are required to take in high school. Students believed (and were supported in their belief by the perceived attitudes of their parents, counselors, and friends) that Social Studies courses were less important for their occupational futures. Thus, although most of the students in our two samples perceived all subjects as important, Social Studies was seen as somewhat less important than Math or English. Grades in Social Studies received greater relative importance compared with learning, part of a pattern in which grades affected entry into future schooling and occupations. Students believed that the basic skills they encountered in Math and English classes were important for entry into almost any job or college they aspired to. Since many scholastic exams and job entry exams are basically divided into two sections--Math and English--the function of these two courses may be clearer to the students interested in advancing in our certificated society (see

Berg, 1971; Illich, 1970; Meyer, 1970). But what about Social Studies? According to our data, Social Studies classes are not perceived as articulated to future occupations as much as Math or English. The basic social skills that are supposed to be taught in Social Studies are either not being communicated to the students or the students are not perceiving them as important for their futures. One reason for this may be that the skills acquired in Social Studies are subtle and diffuse, whereas the basic skills of Math and English are perceived as obvious and specific. Therefore, students are less likely to see a direct link between their experiences in Social Studies classes and their adult lives.

Given the goals of the Committee of the National Council for the Social Studies, which we stated at the beginning of this paper, it appears from our findings that teachers of Social Studies have serious problems. Students did not consider the content of Social Studies to be as important as the skills they learned in other courses, and they did not perceive the classroom atmosphere in Social Studies as more interpersonally constructive.

In short, our findings indicate that teachers of Social Studies face unique difficulties in their subject area. We offer our results not as criticisms, but rather as a challenge. The following suggestions implied by our studies may help meet this challenge. Only one of us has experience as a Social Studies teacher, so our suggestions are only tentative and are expressed in general terms.

1. Each teacher should know his or her specific objectives in each Social Studies course.

2. The importance of the objectives for the student's own future should be communicated.
3. There should be continuing assessment of the extent to which the objectives are being attained, and the results of these assessments should be told to the students.
4. It should be made clear to the students how the long-term goals of Social Studies relate to their own aspirations.
5. For those teachers who have students who cannot do their work in Social Studies because the student lacks the basic verbal skills, we suggest that the curriculum be altered. Learning the basic verbal skills should become part of the Social Studies curriculum. In the schools we studied in San Francisco, a number of Social Studies teachers were already attempting to move in this direction.

We have completed our report on student perceptions of the Social Studies. It is the task of our readers to change those perceptions so that Social Studies can be viewed as an integral part of life-long education.

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